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ABSTRACT

While the exclusive use of French in commercial language courses has the advantage of maximizing student exposure to the target language, it also has the disadvantage of eliminating translation from pedagogical activities. However, translation can be a valuable instructional tool both for helping students assimilate the vocabulary and concepts of French correspondence and business practices and for enabling them to appreciate the cultural differences between the French and Anglo-Saxon business worlds. Translating sentences and brief passages with carefully chosen terminology and grammatical structures provides both practical and creative language use and allows both general and specific language practice. Occasional use of English in translation exercises will not undermine progress in French, and may serve to improve student understanding of English business language and emphasize the differences between French and English practices. Practice in translating business correspondence also underscores the importance of accurately conveying the message. Translation exercises need not be daily or central to the curriculum, but can be a valuable addition to it. (MSE)

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THE ROLE OF TRANSLATION IN COMMERCIAL FRENCH COURSES

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The Role of Translation in Commercial French Courses

Commercial French courses[1]--specialized classes in business correspondence and the language of commerce--require a high degree of proficiency in the second language. Writing correct and appropriate business letters necessitates the use of technical vocabulary and highly formulaic structures and expressions. Furthermore, students must be sensitive enough to the nuances of syntax and vocabulary to differentiate among linguistic registers so that they can control the degree of formality, choosing the style appropriate to the relationship between the correspondents. In order to master the specialized linguistic skills required in French business correspondence, students must first have a thorough knowledge of the standard language as it is used for ordinary communication. Specialists in teaching business French agree that students must have attained near-fluency in the language before they can successfully fulfil the requirements of a Commercial French course. Michael (18), for example, suggests that students need a high enough proficiency to allow for "de l'aisance dans l'expression et de l'élégance dans la forme."[2] The situation is not unlike that of a developing painter who must first master the classical skills of color use and perspective before advancing to abstract expression.

Given the high level of linguistic proficiency among students in Business French courses, it is not surprising that these classes are generally

taught entirely in French; that is, French is the sole medium of communication in written assignments, readings, and classroom discussion, and English is rarely, if ever, used. Neither instructor nor students feel a need to resort to the native language: the students' near-fluency allows them to participate without undue difficulty in a course in which only French is used. The rationale for a French-only business course is a logical one: the less English is used in assignments and discussions, the more students can practice their French. This philosophy affects not only commercial classes, but virtually all courses at the advanced level, whether the focus is on business, literature, grammar, or civilization. While the exclusive use of French in commercial courses offers the advantage of maximizing the students' exposure to the target language, this practice carries an inherent disadvantage: in a class where all communication is in French, translation is necessarily discarded from pedagogical activities. The reason for its dismissal seems obvious: there is no place in a French-only course for an activity which depends on the comparative analysis of French and English. The general exclusion of translation exercises from Commercial French courses is lamentable, however, since translation can be a valuable pedagogical tool not only for helping students to assimilate the vocabulary and concepts of French correspondence and business practices, but also for enabling them to appreciate the cultural differences between the French and Anglo-Saxon business worlds.

Translating sentences and brief passages can provide in a Commercial French course the same linguistic advantages which such exercises provide in standard language classes: when students translate from English to French they are called upon to use specific vocabulary items in a narrowly defined syntactic context. By carefully choosing terminology and grammatical structures, the instructor can ensure that the students practice the forms which they will

encounter most commonly, or the constructions which non-native speakers find most difficult. Translation exercises can provide a means for students to practice French in a context which allows more creativity than manipulative activities such as pattern-response drills or fill-in-the-blank exercises; at the same time, the context is controlled enough to require the use of specific terms and syntactic structures. While a carefully designed exercise will focus on specific grammatical patterns and vocabulary, it will also allow students to practice their language skills generally, since the patterns and terms which the exercise emphasizes will be embedded in sentences. In other words, the students are not asked simply to translate an English word or expression with its French equivalent, but to form a complete French sentence, paying attention to details of syntax and morphology. Thus, such an activity reinforces linguistic skills in general, and not only those patterns which the instructor wishes to emphasize. Translation activities result, then, in "a higher overall competence" (Cordero 351). In addition to their role as a learning device, translation activities provide an excellent means of evaluating the students' progress in assimilating the vocabulary and structures taught in the course, since the ability to render in French a sentence or passage in the native language reflects the student's degree of fluency. Ideally, the student should be able to communicate concepts in French without filtering the ideas through the native English; however, few undergraduate students, even at the advanced level, have achieved this degree of linguistic competence, particularly in a commercial course where they are dealing with concepts which are often as foreign to them in English as they are in French. Although they provide only artificial communication practice, translation activities allow students to test their ability to use new vocabulary or

constructions in the realistic context of a sentence or passage. Translation exercises can serve two functions, then: Cordero (350) sums up this dual purpose when she notes that, "As an educational activity, translation is considered a learning device or a convenient means of verifying comprehension and accuracy."

Despite its value as a pedagogical tool, translation has frequently been discarded in recent years as an appropriate activity for the foreign language classroom. Such exercises are often associated with outmoded teaching approaches such as the grammar-translation method, which have been supplanted by pedagogical philosophies based on communicative competence. While it would be foolish to argue that students can become proficient in a foreign language through translation alone, the value of translation exercises for certain teaching situations should not be overlooked. Students will not seriously undermine their progress in French by engaging occasionally in such English-based activities, and the importance of these exercises as a learning device warrants their being included in many courses.

In the specific context of Commercial French courses, it is frequently the case that students are unfamiliar with the vocabulary of business and commerce not only in French, but also in English. Michael maintains, for example, that:

> La première difficulté (et peut-être la plus importante) vient du fait que la plupart des étudiants n'ont à l'origine que des connaissances techniques ou commerciales minimes. Ils sont même ignorants dans leur propre langue quant au vocabulaire des affaires. Ça ne sert pas à grand-chose de dire à un étudiant qu'"un connaissement" correspond en anglais à "a bill of lading" étant donné que "bill of lading" pour eux ne correspond à rien (17).

It is in this situation that a well designed translation activity can be invaluable for helping students to assimilate new vocabulary, since exercises can be written in such a way that they reinforce in the student's mind the meaning of a technical term with which he or she may not be familiar even in English. Michael's example of the connaissement/bill of lading equivalence can be used as an illustration. If we simply ask the students how to say bill of lading in French, the fact that they can come up with connaissement does not reflect a true understanding of the word, since they may not comprehend it either in French or in English. On the other hand, we can ask students to translate a sentence containing the term, such as The bill of lading which accompanies the merchandise allows the purchaser to verify that his order has been filled correctly. In translating this sentence from English to French, not only does the student learn that the English expression bill of lading corresponds to the French connaissement, but also that both terms refer to a detailed packing list sent along with a filled order. The students reinforce their understanding of the expression because the sentence includes an explanation. Furthermore, the explanation itself necessarily involves a variety of related vocabulary; in this sentence, for example, we find merchandise, purchaser, order, and fill. Such an activity, then, results in a "higher overall competence" not only with respect to linguistic patterns, but also with respect to the specialized vocabulary of business and commerce.

So far we have noted that translation exercises are valuable in Commercial French courses because, as in other types of courses, they reinforce the correspondences between French and English. From another perspective, however, such activities can be used to the opposite end; that is, they can emphasize the differences between French and English. In the specific context

of Commercial French courses, translation exercises can help students appreciate the discrepancies between the two languages as regards appropriate business correspondence. This contrastive role of translation has long been noted in courses where such activities are used solely for increasing linguistic competence. In their famous work on comparative French and English stylistics, for example, Vinay and Darbelnet note that:

> La comparison de deux langues, si elle est pratiquée avec réflexion, permet de mieux faire ressortir les caractères et le comportement de chacune. Ici, ce qui compte, ce n'est pas le sens de l'énoncé, mais la façon dont procède une langue pour rendre ce sens. . . . Il semble donc que la traduction, non pour comprendre ni pour faire comprendre, mais pour observer le fonctionnement d'une langue par rapport à une autre, soit un procédé d'investigation (25).

Similarly, contrastive analysis, a method of linguistic investigation popular among language teachers in the seventies, maintains that by comparing the native language to the target language in order to identify the patterns in which they are the most like and the most different, instructors can predict where students will experience difficulties due to linguistic interference from the native language.[3] Approaches such as comparative stylistics and contrastive analysis are based on the notion that much insight can be gained about the target language, and, ideally, about the native language also, if the two are closely analyzed for purposes of comparison and contrast. In other words, students can achieve a more thorough comprehension of a foreign language if they are aware of the extent to which it differs from their native language.

These theories, which necessitate that comparison between English and French form an integral part of the pedagogical approach, argue only for the linguistic advantages of translation and related activities; that is, they assume only that students' proficiency in using the target language will be enhanced by such exercises. For the purposes of Commercial French courses, contrastive translation activities can also enhance the students' cultural sensitivity by making obvious to them some of the differences between appropriate French and English business correspondence.

A rather trivial example can serve to illustrate how translation can be an effective tool for pointing out cultural differences. If students are asked to translate into French an English business letter which begins with Dear Sir, they may be tempted, because of linguistic and cultural interference from their native language, to render the salutation with its direct French translation Cher Monsieur. In translating Dear Sir with Cher Monsieur, however, they would significantly alter the linguistic register, moving from the formal level of the English greeting to the more intimate level of Cher Monsieur. Similarly, there is in the formal French business letter a tendency to amplify the message, to add a degree of courtesy and diplomacy by communicating in what often seems to English speakers a flowery and wordy manner. Writing a French letter in the more abrupt style typical of English business correspondence could be interpreted by the recipient as a lack of warmth or respect. Thus, for example, an English sentence such as Please confirm acceptance of our order by return should not be translated word for word into French, but reworked into the more elegant Nous vous prions de bien vouloir nous confirmer par retour de courrier l'acceptation de notre ordre.[4] It follows, of course, that it would be totally inappropriate to render the French sentence literally in the English translation of a business letter as

We ask that you be quite willing to confirm to us by return the acceptance of our order.

When faced with the task of translating English business correspondence into French, students soon learn that such exercises involve more than simply finding French equivalents for each of the words and then stringing them together into grammatically correct sentences. Rather, they must analyze the letter in order to determine the message it conveys, and then they must rethink the way in which the message is communicated in order to express the same thoughts in a way which conforms to the social and cultural tenets of the French business world. Translation as it is used to enhance linguistic competence has been described as decoding a message and then "re-encoding" it in such a way that no information has been lost or gained, and that the form of the "re-encoded" message is grammatically and stylistically perfect in the second language (Cordero 351-52). The process of "re-encoding" in the translation of business letters is far more complicated than in other types of translation since it necessitates taking into account not only the linguistic considerations of vocabulary, syntax, and morphology, but also the cultural and sociolinguistic aspects of appropriate formal correspondence in the target language. Although translation in the highly structured context of business writing presents more difficulties than translation in situations allowing for a higher degree of variability in "re-encoding," it also offers more potential value as a pedagogical tool: through such exercises, students come to understand that an English business letter must be completely "re-encoded" in terms of new exigencies of language and courtesy in order to be rendered in correct and appropriate French.

Translation activities such as the ones described here cannot form the basis of a Commercial French course, nor do they need to be included in each

day's lesson plan. The effectiveness of translation activities should not be overlooked, however; Commercial French instructors should be aware of the value of such exercises as pedagogical tools. An exercise composed of a number of sentences illustrating or explaining the meanings of a list of new terms could reasonably be assigned after a chapter or section of the text has been read and discussed, and comprehension questions answered. For example, terms such as free on rail, time charter, bill of lading, and transit permit might be included in an exercise following a unit on modes of transportation. Because it is likely that many of the students will be unfamiliar with these expressions even in English, a translation exercise consisting of a number of sentences containing definitions or illustrations of recently studied vocabulary items will help to reinforce their comprehension of the terms in the native language as well as in French. Translating business letters also need not be a frequent activity in the Commercial French course; a few such exercises early in the term will help to make students aware of the differences in appropriate communication in the French and Anglo-Saxon business worlds. Once they have come to appreciate through translation of letters the cultural differences in commercial communication, they will be not only bilingual, but in effect bicultural, and thus prepared to compose original business letters which are both grammatically correct and socially appropriate.

Notes

[1] For the purposes of this paper the term "Commercial French course" refers to a beginning course in Business French, including both informational units on commerce, banking, advertising, and so on, and extensive practical training in the composing of business letters. Such a course would typically be taught at the advanced undergraduate level.

[2] Likewise, Guback notes in the preface to her Commercial French text that, "De très bonnes connaissances de la langue française sont indispensables pour assimiler tant la théorie que la correspondance" (v).

[3] See, for example, Di Pietro, 2-13.

[4] This example is adapted from Howard and Rose (78-79).

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